

Promising Practices

Helping Teachers Unpack Their “Invisible Knapsacks”

By Nancy P. Gallavan

Sonia Nieto (2004) defines multicultural education as “a process of...basic education for all students...[that] challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism...that students, their communities, and teachers represent” (p. 346).

This definition necessitates inclusion and authenticity (Nieto, 2004, p. 353) emphasizing that all people, especially teachers, need to learn about and respect themselves, one another, and all other people in honor of their many diverse cultural characteristics (Banks, 2001; Zeichner, 1993).

Concomitantly, multicultural education that is both inclusive and authentic should be clearly evident as integral dynamics vital to all curricular content, processes, and context (Gallavan, 2004) within every school and classroom, preK through higher education.

To achieve these goals, teachers must understand, facilitate, and appreciate pedagogy that is culturally responsive and responsible by creating educational environments that offer safe, welcoming, and caring communities of learners for all of their students (Gay, 2000).

When guiding student-centered and collaborative approaches using a valid reciprocal exchange of teaching and learning, teachers model and reinforce critical thinking and problem solving that are co-constructed, salient attributes of learning and

living. Exploring democratic principles, educational equity, and social justice realistically both within the classroom and among society at large creates an awareness of and a responsibility for one another and the world around us—locally to globally.

The establishment of genuine inclusion and caring communities helps students develop a “shared foundational purpose to support each other’s well-being” (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995, p. 63) that is informational and emotional, yet still developmental. This sense of social agency offers an active element of culture (Ratner, 2000) where one feels acceptance, ownership, and empowerment through feelings of enhanced self-efficacy to act, speak, and make choices freely (Deci & Ryan, 1991; Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004).

Preservice and practicing teachers benefit significantly from guided opportunities to learn more about themselves personally, professionally, and pedagogically in this same sociocultural context (Gallavan, 2004; Kincheloe, 2003, 2004). Rigorous efforts must be dedicated to achieving this quest by all teacher educators for their students to delve purposefully and productively into their comprehension of multicultural education, content pedagogical knowledge (Grant & Wieczorek, 2000) and social capital.

Onyx and Bullen (2000) tell us that social capital, or the everyday actions among people, is based upon the mutual trust, reciprocity, and norms present within a community. Through the mindful development of social agency and course content explorations, preservice and practicing teachers can begin their journeys in dismantling constructs such as privilege and

power while overcoming some of the barriers and resistance to using effective multicultural education practices (Gallavan, 1998; Van Hook, 2002).

Revisiting McIntosh’s Paper

In her influential paper on “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” Peggy McIntosh (1989) advances the conversation related to the phenomena of privilege and dominance or power. She contends that the construct of privilege entails a set of beliefs and practices that are assumed or taken for granted by everyone throughout society and have been institutionalized into schools.

McIntosh purports that, in the United States, privilege, dominance, and power are not earned, they merely exist by virtue of being born White, male, heterosexual, and middle class. Additional cultural characteristics including language, geography, religion, size, age, ability, education, etc., can be added to this list. She asserts that individuals born into privilege “are not taught to recognize their own privileges,” and, if acknowledged, they “deny the resulting advantages” (Noel, 2000, p. 115).

Privilege can be viewed as “an invisible knapsack of unearned assets...of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks” (McIntosh in Noel, 2000, p. 116). Individuals with privilege are “taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow ‘them’ to be more like ‘us’” (McIntosh in Noel, 2000, p. 116). McIntosh includes a lengthy set of conditions based on skin-color privileges that

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identify some of the daily effects of privilege, power, and dominance.

In this article I present three innovative practices extending McIntosh's research that offer effective strategies for building community and establishing agency among the preservice and practicing teachers in my multicultural education courses. Each innovative practice offers creative yet appropriate exercises for learners of all ages and stages to connect with multicultural education content, processes, and context that can be adapted and integrated into classrooms easily (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2005).

My students demonstrate the greatest insights through experiential learning, small group discussions, and self reflection that enrich their own learning and serve as models to use in their own future classrooms. Each practice presented here capitalizes upon these strengths by scaffolding upon and interconnecting with the prior exercise(s) to culminate in a holistic learning experience that fulfills Nieto's definition of multicultural education.

My purpose in framing these particular exercises related to privilege and power is to equip teachers with defining opportunities to increase their levels of competence, confidence, and readiness (Gallavan, 2004) that make a much-needed difference with all children in every school and classroom. These exercises prompt critical conversations related to the values and politics that pervade society and education, promote provocative questions about conventional thinking and classroom practices, and provide hope for achieving social justice by examining inequalities and looking for alternative approaches to ensure success (Oakes, 2003, p. XIV).

Unpacking Our Invisible Knapsacks

My multicultural education courses begin unlike many other university courses. By design, I do not want to start by establishing a list of vocabulary and concepts for everyone to digest and reference robotically throughout the course. Instead, I want to guide the students through the processes of knowing themselves, discovering one another, and constructing their own thoughts and beliefs about society by providing a series of interactions and introspections to help them establish the sociocultural context vital for unpacking their own "invisible knapsacks."

Sharing Cultural Artifacts

The first assignment given on week one is rather difficult for the students to understand immediately; by design, I provide few details. The assignment reads, "In two weeks, bring a cultural artifact that describes you and your culture to share in class. Your artifact could be a family heirloom, a treasured photograph, or a contemporary item. If possible, please bring your artifact in a backpack or bookbag." Student should be prepared to talk for approximately three minutes (Gallavan, 2001).

Directly following the introduction and a short discussion related to this assignment, students are asked to record a few reactions to the instructions before leaving class. This second part of the exercise begins our examination of the teaching/learning process through a multicultural lens. I want the students to capture their unfiltered reactions just as their own future preK-12th grade students will react to their teachers' assignments. I encourage the students to think about the assignment, and I reassure them that we will discuss it in further detail during the second week of class.

During the last 20 minutes of class during week two, I remind the students about their upcoming assignment; then I ask if there are any questions. Without fail, students ask me to give specific examples. I tell them that their cultural artifact could be a piece of art or jewelry, a photograph, a book, a toy, etc.; however, it should be something old or contemporary that represents them and their family. Usually a few students start nodding their heads and reassuring one another with more specific examples. Again, I instruct the students to record a few notes about the assignment before leaving class.

To begin week three, I arrange the chairs in a large circle so everyone can see everyone else without obstruction. Usually one student eagerly volunteers to start and get the assignment finished. The first student sets the tone for the entire class session so it is important to guide the students in listening, asking a few key questions, and staying within the time limitation. It is essential to monitor the time closely so all students have an opportunity to share during this one class session. As each student shares, I find that there is increased ease, laughter, questions, caring, and crying as students share from their heads and their hearts. We are starting to build our community and a sense of agency.

After we finish sharing our cultural

artifacts, I ask the students to stand and hold their artifacts in front of them so I can take their individual photographs. I will develop and bring the photographs to class the next week.

Then I explain the second part of this opening exercise. Students will write a two-to-three-page paper recounting their reactions to this assignment starting with the first two weeks of instructions continuing through the third week of bringing artifacts based on their weekly recorded notes. Highlights from the papers will be shared aloud in class the following week.

Describing the Artifact Exercise

To begin week four, again I arrange the students' chairs in a large circle. I give the students their individual photographs and a 3x5-inch note card. I ask the students to write their names, the cultural artifacts, and a brief description of the artifacts on the note cards. Then we attach the note cards to the bottoms of the photographs; I collect all of the identified photographs and place them inside a backpack.

I introduce the students to the overarching concepts of McIntosh's research and how we are going to start unpacking our invisible knapsacks. I pull out one of the photographs from the backpack and ask that this student share personal experiences recapping our cultural artifact exercise. Then I pull out a new photograph for another student to share and we continue until everyone has talked.

As students describe the artifact exercise, they reflect upon the challenges they encountered, especially the White, middle class students. The students detail how they perceived that they had no culture, called their parents, walked around their homes, and thought for long periods of time. They are mystified by the complexity of this seemingly simple assignment.

Their papers reveal the discoveries they made as they chose their items, brought them gingerly to class, unveiled them, and selected their words carefully to describe the artifact and their artifacts' importance to their peers. Almost all of the students reflect upon the need for being accepted and understood by other university students.

In closure, I place a drawing of a backpack on the bulletin board and post all of the students' photographs around the drawing. I want them to see how culture is represented or manifested as a cultural artifact within each of our personal lives (Havas & Lucas, 1994). This two-part ex-

Promising Practices

ercise constitutes our first steps in making the personal professional (Trotman & Kerr, 2001) and unpacking our invisible backpacks to understand privilege and power.

Identifying Perceived Privileges

Prior to beginning the second exercise, I arrange the tables for five students to sit in each group, and I organize the seating arrangement to promote diversity among the members. I distribute the following chart and ask students to complete three tasks:

(A.) rate each item as Y for Yes-I can do this [almost] whenever I want and wherever I am, or N for No-I cannot [or can rarely] do this whenever I want and wherever I am;

(B.) rank each item from 1 [most convenient] to 10 [least convenient];

(C.) write a brief explanation for each item to provide a sociocultural context to clarify individual ratings and rankings to enrich our small-group conversations and large-group comprehension.

Since the vast majority of my teacher education students are White, middle class, and heterosexual, they complete their charts by rating most items as Yes and ranking most items equally convenient. A few of the students share examples from their own lives illustrating some of their differences or denials. They offer few explanations as they seem to think that these privileges are afforded to everyone equally.

For the second part of this exercise I ask each student to select a note card. On each card is listed a cultural characteristic that is not their own nor reflective of the dominant society of our class. For example, a card might read any of the following: "Black," "Spanish speaker," "homeless," "Muslim," "gay," "obese," or "wheel-chair bound."

Then students are given a second chart and asked to complete it through the lens of the cultural characteristic identified on their cards. Now students begin to make the invisible visible. Students are encouraged to immerse themselves into their new existence and complete the chart. This second round of ratings, rankings, and explanations differ greatly from the first round.

This two-part exercise propels students into a lively dissection of social con-

sciousness as they dismantle their perceptions of privilege, power, and dominance. Their notes of explanation reveal their thoughts and beliefs about themselves, others, and society. At the close of this exercise I collect all of the charts and display them on our bulletin board around the drawing of the backpack. I distribute a copy of McIntosh's article for the students to understand the research related to unpacking our invisible backpacks.

Our deepening class conversations confirm the strength of knowing and negotiating our identities (Cummins, 1996) that engender privilege and power (Tatum, 1994) and make visible the cultural characteristics and social dominance reflective of our schools and society (Howard, 1999).

Making the Invisible Visible

This third exercise is one I save for the end of our multicultural education course. It not only helps us to interconnect and put closure to our academic expectations and course explorations, it models a rewarding exercise to use with learners of all ages. This exercise makes the invisible knapsack visible.

Figure 1: McIntosh's Revised Privileges

MCINTOSH'S PRIVILEGES (REVISED)		
<i>Cultural Characteristics:</i>	<i>Yes / No</i>	<i>RANK</i>
1. I can live where I want to live. Explanation:		
2. I can worship where I want to worship & near where I live. Explanation:		
3. I can shop where I will not be followed or harassed & my form of payment is accepted. Explanation:		
4. I can find my preferred kinds of food, clothing, hair salons, hair products, music, etc. Explanation:		
5. I can find people like me portrayed positively on television, in the movies, in songs, etc. Explanation:		
6. I can find posters, toys, dolls, greeting cards, etc., that show people like me. Explanation:		
7. I can find people like me portrayed positively in books, etc., about our nation & history. Explanation:		
8. I can find people like me in most textbooks & teaching materials. Explanation:		
9. I can say what I want about people & be accepted by the people around me. Explanation:		
10. I can be with people like me. Explanation:		

Each student is given two squares of construction paper. One square is 3x3 inches and the other square is 6x6 inches. Each square needs to be a different color. Students are asked to consider the smaller square as their knapsack they can now unpack and make visible with the larger square serving as their sociocultural context or the world around them.

The instructions are to cut or tear pieces of the smaller square away from the outer edges of the smaller square and fold them out so they lie on the larger square with their common edge is still aligned with the inner square. Each folded piece can be unique and discrete from each of the other pieces, or the folded pieces can be considered holistically so all of the pieces communicate a unified picture and message.

For this assignment, I place students in groups of 5 to 7 at each table with the precut pieces of paper and glue sticks. Usually I play gentle music such as Peruvian flutes in the background. The students tend to talk openly with one another discussing their designs throughout the construction. After 30-45 minutes, I ask the students to bring their constructions to an end and to be ready to share their designs with the whole class by explaining the symbolism of the items they have unpacked and made visible from their invisible knapsacks.

Many of the students use this exercise to reflect upon their discoveries and the growth they have experienced throughout the multicultural education course. Their designs represent the first exercise when we shared cultural artifacts and wrote papers linking the multi-week experience with our personal lives.

Many students confirm that they did not recognize their own wealth of cultural characteristics (or those of the people around them) until they not only shared their cultural artifacts in class, but they articulated the selection and description processes captured in their papers. This two-part exercise emphasized the importance of knowing about self and others. Posting our photographs on the bulletin board represented the first step in unpacking our knapsacks.

As the students continue to depict their designs, many of them focus on the second exercise that introduced McIntosh's concepts of privilege and power. The students' remarks articulate the need to understand not only the historical invisibility of privilege but the ways that privilege continues to function in contemporary schools and society (Applebaum, 2003). Students disclose how they rarely see the

world through any lens but their own and the vitality for this exercise in becoming a teacher.

To conclude the third exercise, I read aloud the children's picture book *Maebelle's Suitcase* (Tusa, 1991). In this story, Maebelle, a 108-year-old hatmaker, gives Binkle, a young bird flying south for the winter, a suitcase in which to carry his belongings. However, Binkle's possessions are too heavy and prevent his taking flight. Maebelle mindfully asks for each item to be returned to her on the pretense that she can add the items to her entry in the upcoming hat-making contest.

By asking for Binkle's items, Maebelle helps Binkle to unpack his suitcase, make his artifacts visible, strengthen the social capital and sense of agency between them, and empower each of them to achieve their individual goals. This book cleverly communicates the overarching goals of my multicultural education exercises for helping students unpack their invisible knapsacks.

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